

Book Proposal

Daniel Ellsberg

Monday, July 12, 2010

Threatening Armageddon:

The American Doomsday Machine

Before I released the Pentagon Papers--or before that worked on Vietnam in the Pentagon and Saigon--I was working at the highest levels of the U.S. national security system on completely different issues: command and control of nuclear weapons, plans for general nuclear war, preventing (or if necessary, managing) nuclear Armageddon between the superpowers.^{TP} In 1961 I drafted the top secret guidance from Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara to the Joint Chiefs of Staff for the operational plans for general nuclear war.

The following year I was the only person to serve on two of the three working groups reporting to the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (EXCOM) during the Cuban Missile Crisis. A year later—just before I joined the Defense Department^{full-time} at the highest super-grade level--I was sole researcher in an official classified study of past US nuclear crises, with interagency access several levels above top secret.

My prospective nuclear memoir, *Threatening Armageddon: the American Doomsday Machine*, reflecting that earlier experience and continued research up to the present, will be the first book ever to expose from an insider's perspective the potentially-disastrous risk-taking of U.S. nuclear policy and posture, and the secrecy system that hides these dangers from public scrutiny.

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Monday, July 14, 2010

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risk-taking of U.S. nuclear policy and posture, and the secrecy system that hides these dangers from public scrutiny.

In terms of recent events: my memoir will be the equivalent of a high-placed whistleblower's warning of the risks facing New Orleans *before* Katrina, or of those posed to the Gulf by BP's deep-water drilling plans before the ongoing oil "spill." Insiders' warnings did occur in both those cases, but they never reached the public, nor, as a result, did they influence high-level decisions or false assurances. With much never-before-released data, this memoir will reveal that the fecklessness of our national security elites and their planning apparatus has mirrored that of FEMA and BP. Like the drowning of New Orleans and the outpouring hole in the Gulf--before these foreseeable dangers were realized--large-scale nuclear war remains a catastrophe waiting to happen. But compared to those events its consequences, when it occurs, will be thousands of times more serious.

That last estimate is not rhetorical. It is conservative, by orders of magnitude. Consider the following account of a revelation--still highly classified, like a number of other comparable stories in this narrative—that I received in the midst of my work as a nuclear war planner:

One day in the spring of 1961, soon after my 30th birthday, I was shown how our world would end. Not the Earth, not—so far as I knew then—all humanity or life, but the destruction of most cities and people in the Northern Hemisphere.

What I was handed, in a White House office, was a single sheet of paper with some numbers and lines on it. It was headed "Top Secret"; under that, "Joint Chiefs of Staff"

and “For the President’s Eyes Only.” The deputy assistant to the president for national security, Robert Komer, showed it to me. A cover sheet identified it as the answer to a question President John F. Kennedy had addressed to the Joint Chiefs of Staff a week earlier.

The “Eyes Only” designation on their reply meant that, in principle, it was to be seen and read only by the person to whom it was explicitly addressed, in this case the president. Komer showed it to me because I had drafted the question, which Komer had sent to the JCS in the president’s name. I was in a position to do that because only weeks earlier I had drafted new top secret guidance for the general nuclear war plans, guidance which Secretary of Defense McNamara had sent as a directive to the JCS.

The question was: “If your current plans for general nuclear war are carried out as planned, how many people will be killed in the Soviet Union and China?”

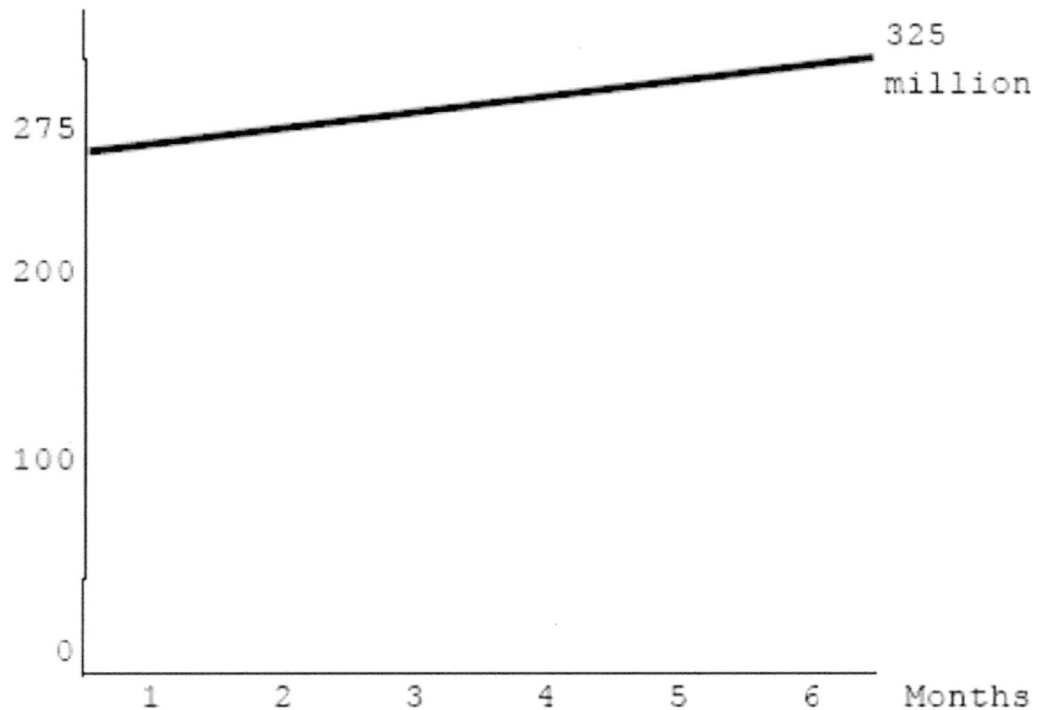
Their answer, a few days later, was in the form of a graph (see representation below). The vertical axis was the number of deaths, in millions. The horizontal axis was time, indicated in months: the vertical axis, the number of deaths, in millions. The graph was a straight line, starting at time zero—on the vertical axis, the immediate deaths expected within hours of our attack—slanting upward to a maximum at six months, an arbitrary cutoff for the deaths that would accumulate over time from initial injuries and from fallout radiation.

The lowest number, at the left of the graph, was 275 million deaths. The number at the right-hand side, at six months, was 325 million.

TOP SECRET

Joint Chiefs of Staff
For the President's Eyes Only

Fatalities
(millions)



TOP SECRET

That same morning, with Komer's approval, I drafted another question to be sent to the Joint Chiefs over the president's signature, asking for a total breakdown of global deaths from our own attacks, to include not only the whole Sino-Soviet bloc but all other countries that would be affected by fallout. Again their answer was prompt. Komer

showed it to me about a week later, this time in the form of a table with explanatory footnotes.

In sum, 100 million more deaths, roughly, were predicted in East Europe. There might be an additional 100 million from fallout in West Europe, depending on which way the wind blew (a matter, largely, of the season). Regardless of season, still another 100 million deaths, at least, were predicted from fallout in the mostly neutral countries adjacent to the Soviet bloc or China: Finland, Austria, Afghanistan, India, Japan and others, even though no U.S. warheads would explode inside their territory. Finland, for example, would be wiped out by fallout from U.S. ground-burst explosions on the Soviet submarine pens at Leningrad. (The total number of “casualties”—injured as well as killed—had not been requested and was not estimated; nor were casualties from any Soviet retaliatory strikes.)

The total death toll as calculated by the Joint Chiefs, from a U.S. first strike aimed at the Soviet Bloc and China, would be roughly 600 million dead. A hundred Holocausts.

As it happened, I had drafted the question about estimated deaths from execution of the general war plans in the belief that the JCS did not know an answer to it. Officers I worked with in the planning staff of the Air Force were convinced that no one, either in the Joint Staff or the Air Staff, had ever calculated the overall human consequences of carrying out their plans. That encouraged me to ask the JCS in the name of a higher authority for an estimate, in the expectation they would be forced to admit, to their embarrassment, that they could not answer it promptly.

I had deliberately limited the question, initially, to effects in the Soviet Union and China alone, instead of worldwide or in the Sino-Soviet bloc. That was to keep the Joint Staff from disguising its lack of any estimates at all by pleading a need for time to calculate casualties, say, in Albania, or the Southern Hemisphere.

Alternatively, I expected the Joint Staff to improvise an estimate which could easily be exposed as unrealistically low. The point of embarrassing them one way or the other was to undermine JCS bureaucratic resistance to changing their plans in the direction of new guidance I had drafted for the secretary of defense earlier that month.

But my expectations were wrong. The Joint Chiefs were embarrassed neither by the question nor by their answer. They offered it without hesitation, without apology, without explanation or excuse or offer of resignation. That was the surprise, given the answer itself, which I recognized as roughly realistic. The implications, as I saw them, were literally existential, bearing on the nature and future of our species.

I myself at that time was not a critic of the explicit logic of deterrence or its legitimacy. On the contrary, I had been urgently working with my colleagues to assure a survivable U.S. capability to threaten “clearly unacceptable damage” to the Soviet Union in response to the most successful possible Soviet nuclear attack on the U.S. But planned slaughter of 600 million civilians—ten times the total death count in World War II, a hundred times the scale of the Holocaust? That aimed-for accomplishment exposed a dizzying irrationality, madness, insanity, at the heart and soul of our nuclear planning and apparatus

In reality, the scale of the potential catastrophe was and remains vastly greater than I or the JCS or any presidents imagined over the next 20 years. Not until 1982-83 did new calculations—recently confirmed—reveal that hemispheric and possibly global clouds of smoke and soot from the burning cities attacked by U.S. or Russian forces would block out sunlight for a prolonged period, lowering temperature drastically during spring and summer, freezing lakes and rivers and destroying crops worldwide. This “nuclear winter” would starve to death billions of humans and could extinguish humanity and most forms of complex life on earth.

Yet the “option” of massive attacks on cities (or, equivalently, upon industrial and military targets within or near cities) remains to this day among the planned alternatives, ready as ever to be carried out, within the strategic repertoire of U.S. and Russian plans and force readiness. This, a quarter-century after the discovery of the nuclear winter phenomenon.

I said earlier that I saw that day in the White House how the northern civilized world would end. I might have thought instead how it could end or might do so, but that wasn’t the conclusion I drew then. The chart I held in my hand that spring morning said to me that any confidence—worse, it seemed, any realistic hope—that the alert forces on either side might never be used was ill-founded.

The Americans who had built this machine, knowing, it turned out, that it would kill more than half a billion people if it were turned on—and who were unabashed in reporting this to the president—humans like that, I feared and still believe, would not fail to pull the switch if ordered: and possibly, in some circumstances, without an order.

And the presidents themselves? A few months earlier, Dwight Eisenhower had secretly endorsed the blueprints of this multi-genocide machine. He had approved this “Single Strategic Operational Plan” despite reportedly being, for reasons I now understood, privately appalled by its implications. He had even demanded, largely for budgetary reasons (!), that there be no other plan for fighting Russians. And the Joint Chiefs had responded so promptly to the present question about the human impact of our planned attacks because they clearly assumed that John Kennedy would, in response, neither fire them nor order the machine to be dismantled. In that, it turned out, they were right.

Surely neither of these presidents actually desired ever to order the execution of these plans, nor would any likely successor want to take such an action. But they must have been aware, or should have been, of the dangers of allowing such a system to exist. Recent experience in crises (and more to come in months ahead, in Laos, Berlin and Cuba) pointed to possible developments that could lead them personally to launch a catastrophic pre-emptive attack. Moreover, they should have reflected on, and trembled before, the array of contingencies—accidents, false alarms, outages of communications, Soviet actions misinterpreted by lower commanders, unauthorized action—that might release pent-up forces beyond their control.

All of these dangers I have studied for over fifty years—specifically investigating them with highly classified official access from 1958 to 1970--and found them to be not only realistic possibilities but in some respects frequently realized. These findings—all top secret at the time, some declassified since, others not—will be a major part of this book.

Eisenhower had chosen, secretly, to accept these risks: to impose them on humanity, and all other forms of life. To my direct knowledge presidents Kennedy and Johnson did likewise. So did Richard Nixon. And so has every president since, including Barack Obama.

I felt sure in 1961 that the existent potential for moral and physical catastrophe—our government's readiness to commit multi-genocidal extermination on a hemispheric scale by nuclear blast and fallout (no one knew yet of the global danger of ecocide and mass extinctions from smoke and ozone depletion)—was not only a product of aberrant Americans or a peculiarly American phenomenon. I was right. A few years later, after the Soviets were humiliated by the Cuban missile crisis and Nikita Khrushchev was ousted, the Kremlin set out to imitate our destructive capacity in every detail.

To be sure, Americans, and U.S. Air Force planners in particular, were the only people in the world who believed that they had won a war by bombing, and particularly in Japan by bombing civilians. In World War II and for years afterward, there were only two air forces in the world, the British and American, that could so much as hope to do that. But the nuclear era has put that demonic temptation—to deter, defeat or punish an adversary on the basis of an operational capability to annihilate most of its population—eventually within the reach of a great many nations. By the spring of '61, four states (now nine) had, at great expense, bought themselves that capability. Humans just like these American planners were surely at work in every nuclear weapons state producing plans like these for nuclear attacks on cities.

I knew personally many of the American planners, though apparently—from the fatality chart—not quite as well as I had thought. What was frightening was precisely that I knew they were not evil, in any ordinary sense. They were ordinary Americans, capable, conscientious and patriotic. I was sure they were not different, surely not worse, than the people in Russia who were doing the same work, or the people who would sit at the same desks in later U.S. administrations. I liked most of the planners and analysts I knew. Not only the physicists at RAND who designed bombs and the economists who speculated on strategy (like me), but the colonels who worked on these very plans, whom I consulted with during the workday and drank beer with in the evenings.

That chart set me the problem, which I have worked on for nearly half a century, of understanding my fellow humans—us, I don't except myself—in the light of this real potential for self-destruction of our species and of most others. In the light of research by others I have come to understand many elements of that potential by now. I will be sharing these in this account. But it is not good news. Looking not only at the last eight years in particular but at the steady failure in the two decades since the ending of the Cold War to reverse course or to eliminate this potential for extinction or near-extinction by nuclear war, it is hard to avoid concluding that it is dangerously likely to be realized in the long run.

Is that inevitable? Are further proliferation, the carrying out of some future nuclear threats by states as well as non-state terrorists, and—what I have focused on above—the persistence of superpower nuclear arsenals that threaten global catastrophe a near-certainty? Is it too late to eliminate these dangers, in time? Some dark days I think so, as I

did that morning in the White House. Most of the time I don't, or I would not have tried as I have and still do to eliminate them, and I would not be using my time to present this account of them.

I will describe a number of practical steps that the US and Russia could take on relatively short notice—given fundamental changes in their outmoded aims and policies, described below, especially in the US--that would eliminate the danger of nuclear winter and radically reduce the likelihood of lesser nuclear catastrophes, including nuclear terrorism. Most of those have been recognized and advocated by an authoritative minority of high-level insiders for over forty years, and by most outside specialists including recently-retired officials for the last generation. I discovered an impressive consensus supporting the whole program of these steps in the course of a program I conducted in 1992-95 entitled *Manhattan Project II*. Yet except for a Comprehensive Test Ban—as yet unratified by the US—not one of these concrete policy changes has been enacted by America or the other nuclear states, despite lip-service to most of them by successive presidents including President Obama.

Why not? I believe that one crucial missing element undermining efforts to mobilize a movement for change has been public awareness of the actual, secret US policies and practices and thus of the urgency of reducing ongoing dangers that result from them. This book aims to counter the deliberate obfuscation that has supported for more than half a century the maintenance of a wildly reckless status quo.

The basic elements of the nuclear war plans remain today what they were fifty years ago, when the guidance I drafted, drastically revising the Eisenhower-era guidance, set the

framework for all subsequent planning. (Reports of that continuity, up to the present, do not reassure me.) Twenty-one years after the Cold War ended, thousands of nuclear weapons remain on hair-trigger alert, targeted primarily on Russian military targets, many in or near cities. The official rationale to the American public for such a system has always been the supposed need to deter—or if necessary respond to—a surprise nuclear attack on the U.S. In this memoir of my work within the highest levels of the nuclear planning and secrecy system and my continuous studies since, I will show:

- Contrary to that widely-believed public rationale, deterring a surprise Soviet nuclear attack—or responding to such an attack-- has *never* been the only or even the primary purpose of these plans and preparations. The nature, scale and posture of our nuclear forces has always been shaped by the requirements of quite different purposes (to be discussed), including U.S. threats to initiate or escalate nuclear attacks.

- Contradicting the cliché that “no nuclear weapons have been used since Hiroshima/Nagasaki”, US presidents *have used* our nuclear weapons several dozen times, mostly in secret from the American public (though not from adversaries). They have used them in the precise way that a gun is used when it is pointed at someone in a confrontation, whether or not the trigger is pulled. To get your way without pulling the trigger is a major purpose for owning the gun (though it encourages gun possession and comparable

threats among rivals and potential opponents.) Several of these secret crises (to be discussed) made nuclear war a near-miss, unknown to the public.

- The emphatic assertion by every major candidate in the 2008 presidential campaign that “all options are on the table” with respect to Iran, reiterated by President Obama, extends this practical use of nuclear weapons to the present moment. President Obama’s recent rejection of a “no-first-use” policy in his 2010 Nuclear Posture Review continues a policy of threatening possible American initiation of nuclear war that has—outside public awareness--characterized every American administration since Truman. It is a policy protested by virtually every non-nuclear state in the world (outside NATO and Japan, and now with some dissenters in NATO).
- Posing as it does the threat of nuclear attack by the US to every state in the world potentially in conflict with us, this U.S. persistent rejection of a no-first-use commitment has always precluded an effective non-proliferation campaign. Indeed, it has encouraged proliferation in states hoping either to counter these American threats or to imitate them. But other aspects of US nuclear policy, as well, have the same effects, effectively *promoting proliferation*: and along with that, precluding the universal, effective inspection system and controls on nuclear materials that are essential to

minimizing the risk of nuclear terrorism. As I shall show, the supposed American policy opposing all proliferation has been not merely ineffective but secretly, at the highest levels, a surprisingly conscious hoax.

- The strategic nuclear system is more prone to false alarms accidents and unauthorized launches than the public (and even most high officials) has ever been aware. This was my special focus of classified investigation in 1958-61, as I will discuss. Later studies—in particular by Bruce Blair-- have confirmed the persistence of these risks. (The just-released documentary *Countdown to Zero*, behind which Blair was a guiding force, brings dramatically to public attention dangers that I was the first, in some cases, to identify as an insider.) The chance that this system could explode “by mistake,” or by unauthorized action, taking much of the world with it, has always been a substantial risk for both superpowers. These dangers undoubtedly apply, perhaps with higher probability, to the new nuclear states.

- With respect to deliberate, authorized U.S. strategic attacks, the system has always been designed to be triggered by a far wider range of events than the public has ever imagined. Moreover, the hand authorized to pull the trigger on U.S. nuclear forces has never in the last half century been exclusively that

of the president, nor even his highest military officials. As I discovered in my command and control research in the late Fifties and informed President Kennedy's Assistant for National Security McGeorge Bundy in his first weeks in the White House, President Eisenhower had secretly *delegated* authority to initiate nuclear attacks—under various circumstances, including outage of communications with Washington (a daily occurrence in the Pacific) or presidential incapacitation (which Eisenhower suffered twice)—to his theater commanders. And with his authorization, they had in turn delegated this initiative, under comparable crisis conditions, to subordinate commanders.

- To my dismay, President Kennedy continued this secret policy. So did Presidents Johnson, Nixon and Carter (although Johnson ran in 1964 on the explicit, false, assurance that he had not and would not do so, in contrast to his opponent General Goldwater). So, almost certainly, has every subsequent president, to this day. This delegation has been one of our highest national secrets. It has remained so despite my unsuccessful efforts to encourage Congressional hearings on it, and despite the disclosure in recent years of documents confirming my warnings. An urgent reason for enlightening the world's public on this reality of the nuclear era is that it is virtually certain that this same secret delegation exists, for comparable reasons, in every nuclear state, including the new ones, North Korea, India

and Pakistan. How many fingers are on Pakistani nuclear buttons? Probably not even the President of Pakistan knows (as President Kennedy did not, at the time of my briefing to Bundy).

- One occasion on which that delegation might well have been exercised was the Quemoy Crisis of 1958. I will discuss a top secret study of that crisis—including key aspects still classified--revealing that the world came closer to nuclear war in that episode than has ever been recognized. That study also reveals in detail a striking and potentially dangerous split in attitudes toward nuclear war between civilian authorities and military commanders that has never been entirely absent, even when at times, as in the last administration with respect to Iran, there has been a reversal of positions.

- Thanks to revelations from the former Soviet Union, there has been growing appreciation of extreme dangers posed by the Cuban Missile Crisis. Yet my own highly classified study in 1964—following my high-level staff participation in the crisis--unearthed never-before-revealed details that, together with the new data, demonstrate two crucial conclusions, missing from all accounts so far, that raise the retrospective risks still higher: a) the real reason why Khrushchev, to the great surprise of John and Robert Kennedy, suddenly acceded to their secret ultimatum